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Feeding Roma families: From hunger to inequalities[2]

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Abstract

Feeding work is complex, laborious and highly gendered in some Roma families compared to the majority population. Specifically, Roma families living in poverty are frequently large and live in substandard housing that makes feeding work more complicated. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in five different Roma settlements throughout Croatia, this paper explores how Roma households that experience severe material deprivation feed their families and their everyday experiences of food in/security and hunger. This study relies on self-reported food in/security as a better measure of directly capturing how the Roma feel about their immediate situation. Likewise, it attempts to draw attention to Roma expressions of deprivation, uncertainty, or concern over access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Based on in-depth interviews rather than just observations, this analysis provides a different perspective on meaning of feeding in the light of unprecedented financial insecurity that is experienced by many Roma families and the ensuing inequalities are analysed. Some of the ways that feeding Roma families relates to gender and the (in)equalities that surface are also discussed. Findings show that a lack of access to healthy and nutritious food aggravates health, social, educational, economic and gender inequalities that squarely places Roma at the bottom rung of the social ladder and generates social suffering.

Keywords: food poverty, hunger, inequalities

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2 Please note that this article does not refer to all Roma in Croatia but some Roma families that experience severe material deprivation that were a part of this study.

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Feeding Roma families: from hunger to inequalities

Introduction

Researchers contend that the study of food and eating is important in its own sake since food is utterly essential to human existence and often insufficiently available (Mintz–Du Bois 2002: 99). The study of food and its social significance has a long tradition in the discipline of anthropology. Scholars have identified its importance for the formation of human interrelationships or structure of social groups (Richards 1932); as a means to express social relationships or as a symbol of social structure (Douglas 1975) as a product of conduct codes and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur (Murcott 1982). Unquestionably, food is never 'just food' and its significance can never be purely nutritional (Caplan 1997: 3). Hence, food is not simply a matter of sustenance or materiality, it is also rich in its capacity to convey meaning (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Packed with social, cultural and symbolic meanings, food is always part of an elaborate symbol system that conveys cultural messages. For instance, where and what we eat, with whom, and at what time of day or night are directly influenced by a variety of factors such as age, gender, social status, ethnicity, religion and income. Succinctly, Bell and Valentine (1997: 3) noted that "every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about ourselves, and about our place in the world." Thus, foods are not only things in their own right, but convey meanings and mark social relationships of exclusion and inclusion (Valentine 1999).

Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart. (Mintz–DuBois 2002: 109). Beginning with Bourdieu, a vast literature now explores food as a source and marker of social distinction. In his highly influential book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1986) Bourdieu suggests that the upper classes use food to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. In other words, preferences for specific food groups are manifestations of taste. Displaying 'good taste' by eating foods considered superior is a source of distinction. Accordingly, different consumption patterns are one of the ways the rich distinguish themselves from the poor (Fitchen 1988). Class, caste and gender hierarchies are maintained in part through differential control over and access to food (Goody 1982). Sociologist, Claude Fischler elaborates: 'the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently' (1988: 275). Clearly, the food choices made individuals or groups can reveal beliefs, desires, hardships, background knowledge, assumptions and characters. Accordingly, food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity (Almerico 2014: 1).

Addressing everyday practices associated with food may be central to tackling questions of who we are, as women and men and as members of different social groups. For example, feeding may be only one difficult task

among many that needs broader explication, because as DeVault (1994: 168) notes, the differing material bases of households/family groups- connections to wealth and occupation, the resulting amount and stability of cash resources and redistributions of resources all combine to construct quite different conditions for the conduct of household work. She aptly adds that it is an illusion that all families share a similar experience of purchasing and preparing foods (1994: 202) to feed their families. Class seems to be a particularly salient element, as access to various types of food is highly dependent on earnings. (Little–Ilbery–Watts 2009: 205). Studies have confirmed that the relationship between food consumption and social position is a well-established fact (Warde 1997). Thus, besides shaping the context in which people obtain, prepare, and consume food (DeVault 1994) social class organizes the rules individuals follow to determine what types and amounts of food to eat (Counihan 1992).

It has been noted that in modern industrial societies food flows in divergent streams; a trickle of less nourishing foodstuffs to the poor and unprivileged and huge quantities of highly nourishing foodstuffs to the rich compared to societies based on primitive technologies where hunger is shared (Marshall Sahlin's argument (1972) cited in Douglas 2003: 4). To explain these inequalities, anthropologists study individual experience and the larger social matrix in which it is embedded to see how various large scale forces come to be translated into personal distress and disease (Farmer 1996: 261). Scholars have emphasized the need to study the political-economic structural forces that are at work in different contexts, which operate invisibly and often blame the powerless. First defined by Galtung, structural violence refers to the political-economic organization of society that imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress, from high morbidity and mortality rates to poverty and abusive working conditions (Bourgois 2001: 7). For instance, extreme economic inequalities according to medical anthropologist, Farmer (1996: 263) promote disease and social suffering that is structured by historically given (and often economically driven processes and forces) that conspire whether through ritual or routine to constrain agency. Consequently, dynamic and multifaceted, symbolic violence manifests in both face-to-face interactions that occur in spaces (such as the welfare office) and through representational politics that occur within symbolic spaces (such as policy documents and media reports) (Hodgetts et al. 2012 cited in Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, and Tankel 2014: 2039). It is also worth noting that structural violence "naturalizes" poverty, sickness, hunger, and premature death, erasing their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted and no one is held accountable except the poor themselves (Scheper-Hughes 2004). In her heartbreaking ethnography of hunger in north-east Brazil (1993) Scheper-Hughes lays the blame directly on political-economic inequality rather than blaming people living in poverty.

To reiterate, based on ethnographic fieldwork in five different Roma settlements throughout Croatia, this paper explores how Roma households that experience severe material deprivation feed their families and their everyday experiences of food in/security and hunger. This study relies on self-reported food in/security as a better measure of directly capturing how the Roma feel about their immediate situation. Chronic food insecurity[3] is understood as being associated with problems of continuing or structural poverty as well as low

3 This differentiation was made in the 1986 World Bank report Poverty and Hunger (FAO 2003) from transitory food insecurity, which involved periods of intensified pressure caused by natural disasters, economic collapse or conflict. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 2003).

incomes. Likewise, it attempts to draw attention to Roma expressions of deprivation, uncertainty, or concern over access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. This study recognizes that food is one of the most important items of consumption and has to be consumed regularly, frequently and appropriately for the maintenance of life and health. For this reason, I use the definition of hunger formulated by anthropologist, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993: 137) "It is the hunger of those who eat everyday but of insufficient quantity, or of an inferior quality, or an impoverished variety, which leaves them dissatisfied and hungry." Specifically, this paper delves into the common daily occurrence of feeding and eating among Roma families to find deeper meaning in this every day practice. Based around in-depth interviews rather than just observations, this analysis provides a different perspective on the meaning of feeding in light of unprecedented financial insecurity that is experienced by many Roma families and the ensuing inequalities are analysed. Some of the ways that feeding Roma families relates to gender and the (in)equalities that surface are also discussed. Interviews are contextualized within the complex specificities of each particular Roma settlement that has been shaped by a specific history, social/environmental setting and political economy. Further, fieldwork material does not only give insight into food provisioning/cooking and other related experiences in Roma families but are also a source of data on the way gender and other social categories such as ethnicity, age, and class intersect. Prior to discussing the methodology used in this study a brief outline of the socio-economic context and the situation of Roma in Croatia will be outlined.

Growing social inequalities

Many of the advantages (or 'unattainable ideals' in some cases) enjoyed during socialism (e.g. full employment, social security, food/flat subventions, free healthcare, free education, gender equality) were lost or transformed following transition. As observed in all transition countries, there was a rapid and large growth in social inequalities (Bićanić and Franičević, 2005), which increased vulnerabilities. The transition phase from a socialist to a market economy was further complicated by the war in Croatia (1991–1995), which had a devastating impact on Croatia's economic and social fabric and was characterized by hyperinflation and a decline in output, especially industrial output, depreciation of the country's currency, increasing rates of unemployment, higher levels of poverty and the growth of an informal economy (UNDP 1997). This shift to a market economy was also accompanied by a diversification of available foods and dynamic changes in the food sector (introduction of chain supermarkets and hypermarkets, global retail stores, huge shopping centres on the outskirts of metropolitan areas). However, bearing in mind the post-transition crisis, the recent recession has even further decreased the purchasing power of low-income households. In addition, recent welfare reforms[4] have considerably exacerbated the dilemmas faced by families already living stressful lives with insufficient resources. Moreover, the increasingly stigmatising, discriminatory and punitive approaches to welfare provision found in contemporary neoliberal societies (see Bauman 2005, Bourdieu 1998) are also evident. As expected, rigorous measures and substantial cuts to social programmes and services are not named as violent acts, despite their disproportionate and negative impact on those living on the margins. Harsh welfare cuts and new

4 See the Social Welfare Act in force since 1-1-2014 Official Gazette 157/13 and 152/14.

regulations have undoubtedly intensified the hardships Roma households face, especially if families are large.[5] Effectively, these drastic changes fail to recognize the ordeal of daily life for families in need and the ways in which they hurt and degrade people.

Situation of Roma in Croatia

Studies across Europe have consistently shown that the Roma are over-represented in all categories in need of social protection: the very poor, the long-term unemployed, the unskilled, the uneducated, members of large families, individuals without residence permits/citizenship.[6] Similarly, in Croatia, Roma are poorer than the majority population and the material and financial circumstances of Roma populations are far worse than populations that are defined as living in absolute poverty (Šućur 2005). A lack of access to adequate healthcare, low levels of education resulting from exclusion or segregation in the education system, very poor and sub-standard housing conditions and low employment rates are just some of the factors that, in a cause and effect relationship, contribute to persistent marginalisation and involuntary Roma dependence on social welfare benefits. To illustrate, a representative study of Roma households (969) in 2004 showed that 74.2% of the total sample reported that social welfare benefits were the most important source of income while only 17.6% reported that formal employment was the most important source (Štambuk 2005) More recent figures show that Roma are still over-represented in unemployment where it is evident that the percentage of Roma as a total of the unemployed population is approximately four times greater than the total population.[7] As a result, the socio-economic situation of the Roma population adversely determines their access to different types of services and care, including healthcare, which considerably increases health risks and drastically reduces Roma life expectancy. For example, only 1.4% of Roma adults are aged 65 or above, compared to 16.8% of the majority population (CBS 2013a: 19), which indicates a markedly lower life expectancy among the Roma. Taking into consideration the cumulative effect of all of these factors that contribute to social exclusion and discrimination, feeding work for some Roma families becomes more complicated.

For comparative purposes, some key findings related to expenditure on food and consumption practices among Roma households compared to non-Roma households in Croatia are useful. In a recent study,[8] Roma and non-Roma households spend almost equal amounts on food and other household items (e.g. toiletries, detergent, etc.) but the income of Roma households is 2000 kn less (Zrinščak 2014: 38), which reflects heightened economic hardship. Specifically, this study shows that 92.3% of Roma live in relative poverty compared to 42 % of non-Roma in Croatia (Zrinščak 2014: 35). Correspondingly, data from this same study shows that 39% of

5 The new Social Welfare Act Official Gazette, 157/13 see Article 30(4) directly affects large families because the guaranteed minimum allowance for 2014 was capped at 3,017.64 HRK (395EUR) regardless of family size (see www.mspm.hr). In addition, the guaranteed minimum allowance Article 30(1) for a single person is 800 HRK (105 EUR) or for a household member of working age (single parent 800 HRK; 480 HRK (63 EUR) adult household member). Entitlement to this allowance is for two years Article 39(1) and a new claim cannot be filed for a period of three months following loss of this right Article 39(2) see Social Welfare Act Official Gazette 157/13 and 152/14.

6 See European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and Ringold–Orenstein–Wilkens (2005).

7 4,499 Roma or 1.42% of the total number of unemployed were registered as unemployed in 2011; Government of Croatia (2012), 51.

8 This UNDP/WB/EC survey was conducted on a random sample of Roma and non-Roma households living in areas with higher density (or concentration) of Roma populations in Croatia in 2011 (757 and 350 households respectively, see Potočnik. 2014a: 21).

Roma respondents (compared to 5% of non-Roma respondents) reported that household member/s went to bed hungry because they could not afford food (UNDP/WB/EC regional Roma survey 2011 data). Poignantly, this shows how undernourished families live next to fed ones. Almost four times fewer Roma compared to the rest of the population produce their own food, which is probably because only a small number of Roma own land that could be cultivated or used for animal breeding for their own consumption (Potočnik 2014b: 14). In another study on poverty and the well-being of young children,[9] Roma families reported that they could not afford the following: i) 48.2% fresh fruit or vegetables at least once a week; ii) 21.9% three meals a day; iii) 47.4% meat, fish or vegetarian substitute at least once a day; iv) 3.2% at least one hot meal a day; and v) 63.7% at least 20 kn (2.62 EUR) a week for sweets[10] (Kletečki Radović 2015: 67).

Methodology

This paper is based on research findings from a wider research project entitled Roma Early Childhood Inclusion RECI+ Croatia study[11] which was a joint initiative sponsored and supported by the Roma 'Kopaçi' Initiatives at the Early Childhood Program (ECP) of Open Society Foundations (OSF), the Roma Education Fund (REF) and UNICEF. The aim of this study was to collect data on the situation of Roma and the challenges that their families face. Although the main focus of this wider study was on education, the ways in which Roma families feed their families and experiences of food in/security and hunger were also explored.

The core research team in this wider research project consisted of seven members (four postdoctoral researchers and three Ph.D. students) from the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar in Zagreb, Croatia. In this collaborative ethnography, our personal biographies, education and professional training as well as stages in the life cycle were considerably different. With different lenses, we scrutinized one another's contributions, interpretations and insights and often compared what we saw, heard, and felt in the field. Roma community leaders at each location also joined our team to facilitate entry into Roma settlements and to assist us in all aspects of fieldwork. Their contribution was especially valuable, because they introduced us to willing research participants from their own communities who identified themselves as Roma.

Fieldwork began in September 2013 and ended mid-November 2013 and was carried out at five different locations: Kozari putevi, Capraške poljane, Parag, Darda and Vodnjan/Galižana. Although this study was not representative, these locations were chosen to capture the heterogeneity (in terms of language, religious, cultural, social and historical differences) of Roma populations that live throughout Croatia. Research sites cover areas with significant Roma populations as well as rural and urban locations. All of these differences (e.g. rural/urban, religious, socio-economic, etc.) are important sociological parameters shaping food consumption.

This study uses ethnographic data based on semi-structured interviews that was preceded by a brief

9 This included 1139 parents of preschool children (945 families on social benefits and 194 with employed parents) that were surveyed in 2013. Out of parents on social benefits, 251 Roma parents of preschool children were included.

10 These percentages are higher in all categories when compared to the responses of other social welfare benefit recipients who are not Roma or have children with disabilities which are as follows: i) 31.7%; ii) 5.8%; iii) 40.9%; iv) 2,2%; and v) 50.6% (Kletečki Radović 2015: 67).

11 The RECI+ Croatia report is accessible at: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/reci_croatia_report_eng-final_web.pdf.

survey for demographic details. The interview sample was created by selecting a range of Roma families (i.e. with different material bases as well as single-parent, nuclear and extended households) with kindergarten and school aged children. Since the experience of hardship and suffering is not effectively conveyed by statistics, open-ended interviews were designed to give the participants an opportunity to voice their opinions and experiences in their own terms. This was considered to be crucial as people experiencing hardship of any kind have an accumulation of practical experiential knowledge about their situation that researchers lack. For this reason, this paper mainly draws upon qualitative research that does not transform the rich detail of people's lived experience into quantifiable categories that lose their overall meaning. Although the interviews followed guidelines, they allowed ample opportunity for research participants to elaborate or to introduce issues they considered relevant. To maximize the reliability of findings, all interviews were transcribed word for word preferably by each researcher to preserve authenticity and ensure accuracy. In this way, the context that is so easily lost in team research was also accessible. Field notes specifically referring to each researcher's observations, experiences, interactions and impressions were also collected. Research participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Regular as well as unplanned meetings to exchange ideas as well as share experiences and to compare field notes were also held during and after fieldwork with all research team members including our Roma assistants. Thematic categories were produced based on an initial reading of transcripts as well as field observations. Further analysis searched for emergent themes and discourses in the interview transcripts.

Socio-demographic findings

The socio-demographic survey for the RECI+ Croatia study included 135 Roma households and was not representative of all the Roma populations in Croatia. Roma families in this sample are large (on average 4.45 children) and they often live in substandard housing in settlements with poor infrastructure. Almost half (46%) of all Roma households in this study reported that social welfare benefits (child allowance, social assistance and maternity leave) were the main source of income for the household, while almost all households (87.41%) were beneficiaries of some type of social welfare.[12] Linked with social exclusion, only 9% of respondents in the RECI+ Croatia study reported that they were formally employed or self-employed. In relation to education levels, nearly a quarter (24%) of the sample finished primary school while only a small number (8%) reported that they finished secondary school. Such low levels of education and employment adversely affect the ways in which Roma families can feed their families and themselves.

To obtain a wider understanding of social exclusion, the RECI+ Croatia study used one of the Europe 2020 indicators that measures deprivation. This is a 9-item scale that covers issues relating to economic strain, durables, as well as housing and environment of the dwellings.[13] Findings show that half of all households in the sample (50%) are severely materially deprived (cannot afford more than three items). In comparison,

12 In other studies that are only based in the County of Medjimurje (one of twenty counties in Croatia with the highest Roma population) reports indicate that over three quarters of the Roma population (78%) receive a support allowance (Government of Croatia 2012: 73) or about 90% of households in one Roma settlement (Kuršanec) in the same county, depended on support allowance as the main source of income, between 2000 and 2008 (Šlezak 2010: 83).

13 http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion.

14.8% of Croatian society as a whole faces severe material deprivation at the national level (CBS 2013b: 34). Table 1 shows what Roma households (N= 135) in the RECI+ Croatia study could not afford.

Table 1. The percentage of Roma households that could not afford different items that measure deprivation.

% of HHs	ITEMS
40%	to pay rent, mortgage or utility bills
36%	to keep their home adequately warm
40%	to eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day
83%	to pay unexpected expenses
90%	to go on holiday for one week
53%	a car
27%	a washing machine
8%	a colour TV
23%	a telephone

These data show that people living in poverty[14] not only lack the financial capacity to respond effectively to unexpected events but also do not have adequate resources to pay for indispensable expenses such as sources of protein (40%), public utility bills (40%) and heating (36%). Other items such as a car (essential for grocery shopping especially in large families that live in isolated rural locations) were affordable to just over half of the households (53%). It should be noted here that recent social welfare reforms (in effect since the beginning of 2014) have introduced even more stringent rules concerning car ownership and receipt of social welfare benefits.[15] Further, items such a washing machine were not affordable for over a quarter of the Roma households (27%). Interview data reveals that many Roma families cannot afford this labour-saving appliance because buying food is a priority.

Lived experiences of food in/security and hunger

The qualitative part of this research project involved 35 Roma parents (7 at each location) and their children (35) who participated in interviews at their homes.[16] Data that specifically focus on food and eating from these interviews illustrate how half of these households[17] struggle to feed their families and their everyday experiences of food in/security and hunger. The following themes are explored in this paper: i) consumption levels at home/school and quality of food; ii) difficulties of feeding large families, and iii) gendered aspects. More than half of these households (54%) experience food poverty because they could not afford meat, fish or protein equivalent every second day. Most of the qualitative data presented in the following analysis comes

14 This term is preferred to 'poor people' to indicate that poverty is a material condition rather than an ontological condition as well as a condition that may vary throughout one's lifetime (see Jeppesen 2009).

15 The only exceptions are now in cases when a car is needed for the transportation of persons with a disability, older or infirm persons or when a car is necessary due to the absence or infrequency of public transport (see Social Welfare Act Official Gazette 157/13 and 152/14). At the time of this fieldwork, families on social benefits with a large number of children could own a car (see Social Welfare Act Official Gazette 33/12, 46/13, 49/13 in force between 24-03-2012 and 31-12-2013).

16 As this study adopts a holistic approach, interviews were also conducted with kindergarten principals and teachers, school principals and teachers, social workers, mayors, and doctors at each field site.

17 In line with Messing (2014: 821) who reminds us that it is very important to be explicit throughout the process of analysing and evaluating data and to avoid speaking about 'the Roma' in general which could reinforce the ethnicization of poverty, the following data presented in this article refers to Roma families who experience severe material deprivation.

from these interviews with families that experience deprivation, uncertainty and concern related to food. Unsurprisingly, most of them (90%) belonged to the group of households that are severely deprived (could not afford more than three items). Social welfare is the main source of income in these households. Their quotes that are presented throughout this paper attest to Hickey and Downey's finding (2003: 7) that food poverty has become an increasingly recognized aspect of living on a low income and of being socially excluded. These are families that experience a sharp and continuous deterioration in their material and social conditions as a result of poverty.[18] As food is absolutely essential for existence, family budgets always prioritize the need for food. This is well summed up in the following quote from a Roma woman who accurately observes that their money is always spent on what is necessary, which is always just food, often to the detriment of other needs such as health, education, housing, social and leisure activities.

> *Among Roma food is very important perhaps because we have nothing else, whatever we earn goes towards food. Everything revolves around food, this is the basic… there's nothing left for anything else!* (Dijana 39, mother of 2 children)

Home meals and their affordability

Research findings show that the number of home meals in Roma families is variable between three and six times a day. Many families reported that they needed to be flexible to meet the needs of their children who often eat snacks more times a day. As previously mentioned, the focus of this paper is on those families who are living in food poverty (i.e. over half of the families that were interviewed) and their experiences show that they cannot always afford three meals a day. The following excerpts show their everyday struggles around feeding their families which is not well understood by the social services. Even when in acute need of food, research participants at some locations report being denied adequate support. For example, Ratko, father of four children is struggling to feed his family. His youngest child is five months old and is not breastfeeding because the infant's mother is in hospital. With little support from social services and no access to a soup kitchen, he finds it extremely difficult to provide meals, which are frequently uncooked for his children, especially the youngest.

> *Yes, they have breakfast, lunch and dinner, sometimes there is nothing for dinner to be honest… there's not enough money for that milk (formula) my child is bottle-fed, she can't be breastfed… I don't have enough for that milk.* (Ratko 36, father of 4 children)

Evidently, from a young age, his children are susceptible to health inequalities, because they regularly do not have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. For Lina, the most crucial and worrisome problem is that she frequently does not have food to give to her children. Her quote shows the seriousness and urgency of her family's situation and how her desperation forces them to be involved in illicit activities which reveals their disadvantaged place in the world.

> *Today, my children don't have anything to eat. I'm forced or my husband to go somewhere and earn something or steal something to give them something to eat* (Lina 31, mother of 4 children)

Even with institutional support, this is sometimes not enough for large families that are dependent on

18 According to the European Anti-Poverty Network, 2013 poverty is associated with material need – lack of food, fuel, healthcare, adequate clothing and housing and lack of resources (usually financial) to meet some or all of these needs.

social welfare. In the next example, Serena's large family relies on a soup kitchen (only available at one location) for lunch (that hopefully is enough to feed her family for dinner). However, this mother of nine admits that she does not have anything to give to her children for breakfast four or five times a month.

> *When I have bread, I give them marmalade, for example or when I have money, I buy and fry them some eggs, sausages or milk, salami… I always make something when I have something, but when I don't have anything they have to wait till I get home from the soup kitchen* (Serena 40, mother of 9 children)

In the same vein, although lunches for this family are available at the soup kitchen, this mother expresses concern because she cannot purchase food items for breakfast.

> *We get social benefits and child benefits but this is not enough. When this runs out, we have to live on something until then… we need two litres of milk a day, cocoa, tea…* (Karmina 25, mother of 6 children)

In other words, the benefits they receive each month are insufficient to cover the cost of other meals for her large family which exacerbates the anxiety and stress that she experiences especially when the family budget is low.

School meals and what they convey

As children move between different social spaces (e.g. home, kindergarten, school, friends' houses), they encounter and negotiate different foods in different spaces and while doing this, discover and claim new identities. Roma children usually first encounter foods and food practices which are new to them in early childhood settings such as kindergartens or primary school. Some children are excluded from these meals because their parents cannot afford to pay monthly fees for food at school. This food is only freely available to some children in this sample. In other words, depending on location and the fiscal capacities of the municipality as well as the welfare status of their parents, some children miss out on food at school.[19] This pertinently demonstrates how food conveys social status, differences in social standing, and exclusion as well as friendship, integration and acceptance (Feichtinger 1996). Children who belong to families living in poverty have first-hand experience of this social inequality at an early age when they have to stay hungry while watching other children eat. Importantly, food is also of practical nutritional value that is vital and irreplaceable in learning environments. Diet for some Roma children is nutritionally deficient and if they are not eating anything at school that has serious implications for unhealthy childhoods and ineffective learning at school as echoed in this father's comment.

> *For 4 HRK, let's say, my child will get 2 slices of bread, milk and spread and will be calm and level-headed because he knows that his stomach won't hurt, that he won't be hungry. Those children that don't eat can't follow class… they will be nervous.* (Stanislav, 32, father of 7 children with 4 children in primary school)

Researchers have found an association between diet quality and academic performance and have argued that broader implementation and investment in effective school nutrition programmes have the potential to improve student access to healthy food choices, diet quality, academic performance, and, over the long

19 Some municipalities cannot afford to cover the cost of school meals at all while in others this depends on whether parents are recipients of social welfare.

term, health (Florence–Asbridge–Veugelers 2008: 209). In an attempt to emphasize the importance of food for school children and that skipping meals leads to poorer performance at school, a mayor at one of the field locations organized seminars in collaboration with a health clinic for parents at the local primary school. In the following quote, he points out that school children need to have breakfast because they need energy (food) to learn.

> *Do you know what breakfast means even if this is just an apple or a slice of bread? If a child is hungry, he/she can't follow lessons, but if a child is satisfied he/she can concentrate and follow classes.* (Local mayor)

Although these educational seminars are commendable, this particular municipality does not cover any of the costs of school meals. The principal at this school confirms that Roma children who do not eat at school cannot keep up with the other children that do.

> *The biggest barrier is precisely this – they are unable to afford what other children have. Their parents cannot afford it. First, the basics, and that is food. Most children (referring to Roma children) don't eat at school. Parents receive social assistance; they receive child allowances and very skilfully allocate this money to pay for other things, to pay off debts. They cannot seem to understand that they have to set aside some of this money and pay for meals at school for their children. If a child is hungry and tired you can conclude for yourself what the results of their work will be like. So, they lag behind other children, they can't learn how they need to…* (Principal of primary school)

Overtly, she blames Roma parents who do not pay for their children's school meals but does not take into account structural forces (e.g. economic hardship of living on social benefits and meeting the costs of feeding large families) that operate invisibly. The inadequate material bases of some families means that their children have to miss out on school meals which in turn affects their ability to learn and in the long run contributes to educational inequalities.

Far from unified, school meals at each research location were highly variable in terms of costs, amount, content, and overall satisfaction among Roma children and parents. Some parents complained that children also experienced stigmatisation and discrimination in relation to food at schools.[20] The general criticism from low-income households was that school food is too expensive considering that it is not 'proper food' i.e. cooked food, but just fast food.

> *Children can hardly wait to get home! As soon as they come through the door they want to eat – this means that this is a waste of money!* (Franjo 35, father of 3 children)

The price of these meals is not reduced for families with more children. For example, three of Ružica's children are at primary school and in total she pays 270 HRK (35 EUR) each month for their school meals, which she thinks is too pricey considering what they get.[21] She says that they are at school for at least 5–6 hours and that 'one school meal' is 'not enough' for her children. In the past, she recalls that schools provided more sub-

20 Attesting to discriminatory practices, during fieldwork at one particular location we also learned that Roma children never ate with other children from the majority population but always had to wait in the past.

21 This was the school's menu for the week while we were in the field. Monday: spread, chocolate milk, biscuits; Tuesday: minced meat, pasta and salad; Wednesday: sandwich, drink; Thursday: bean salad and dinosaurs; Friday: croissant, chocolate milk.

stantial meals. She is also annoyed that her children are not getting as much as other children at other schools for almost the same price.

> *I'm not satisfied at all because children at other schools have two meals.* (Ružica 25, mother of 6 children

Sometimes parents are unable to pay the monthly fee for school meals on time which can also be very stigmatising and a source of embarrassment for children. One parent told us how her daughter in grade 1 was singled out in class because her mother was not able to pay for her meals that month on time. Her daughter was warned by her teacher: *"You won't get a meal next week if your parents don't pay by Monday!"*

Some parents voiced discontent because they felt that their children were being discriminated against because they do not eat pork for religious reasons. In particular, they reported that cooks at the school were very insensitive towards their children. In an intimidating way, children were sometimes told that 'they wouldn't know the difference between different types of meat anyway!' so there was no need to give them an alternative meat. When they do get a substitute, children described this food as being similar to 'chewed food.'

> *When our children say that they do not eat pork they are told that they have to eat what they get! So we pay for meals that they can't eat – they just eat the bread.* (Melissa 31, mother of 5 children)

Clearly, these experiences illustrate how food is never just food but that an insufficient quantity of food can transform into health, educational and social inequalities.

Quality of food

Although food is an ordinary and essential part of our lives there are norms and rules that govern our eating and food choices that we hardly ever think about. In this section, the quality of food consumed will be considered including the representation of major food groups and the extent of reliance on microwave/pre-prepared items. Dietary quality in terms of preferences (i.e. are they getting enough of what they want to eat?) and whether their food is obtained from socially acceptable sources (e.g. supermarkets/restaurants versus handouts/rubbish dumps) will also be explored.

In response to the research question "What did your family eat yesterday?" the following findings were recorded.[22] Generally, in most Roma households there was a heavy reliance on meat, potatoes and bread. Typically, the main meal of the day usually consists of an animal protein and a side dish with a starchy base. Meat seemed to be essential and is thought to give structure and meaning to a meal. Bread is always served with every meal; sometimes this is home-made to save costs. There was a marked absence of fruits and vegetables in both materially and severely deprived households.[23] There was also a predominance of home cooked meals and no microwave or pre-prepared food was mentioned.[24] An abundance of processed foods (salami, liver sau-

22 In terms of analysis, more systematic and actual observations of these food events at home would have been more fruitful but were not possible considering the research aims of the wider research project.

23 The WHO/FAO recommends consuming a minimum of 400g of vegetables and fruit a day (2012: 6).

24 It has been noted that eating foods prepared outside the home is also connected with class. In France, Grignon and Grignon 1980 (cited in Plesz–Gojand 2014: 177) found that middle class households bought more ready-prepared meals than working-class households.

sage, spreads, etc.) usually eaten for breakfast or in the evening was also noted while there was little representation of organic or any foods that could be categorized as health foods. According to a social worker with 26 years of work experience with the Roma, the situation has considerably improved because fewer children are now hospitalized for digestive system problems. Paradoxically, he attributes this to the availability of cheaper and less nourishing food.

> *We had a hospital full of Roma children aged between one and three years or even younger because of digestive problems. Due to poor hygiene, inadequate preparation of food and other things… Now it has improved a little. They can buy ready-made food that has been processed, which is probably unhealthier, but at least they eat, it's cheaper, poorer quality food but at least they are healthier.* (social worker)

Analysis of the interview material shows that household diets depend on three different factors: i) location (i.e. accessibility to foods and the fiscal capacities or 'generosity' of rural municipalities/cities); ii) traditions of locality (available local ingredients) and/or women's natal households (reliance on 'old fashioned food') and iii) socio-economic circumstances. This last factor was overwhelmingly the most salient; a factor that overwhelmingly governs eating practices and food choices. Clearly, findings show that Roma families with at least one employed family member can spend more money on food and exercise more choice in relation to the family diet. As researchers have noted, the higher the socio-economic status, the healthier the diet (understood as higher consumption of vegetables and fruits (Kopczyńska–Zielińska 2015: 8). In comparison, families with low income struggle to make ends meet to feed their families, especially just before social welfare payments. Many adopt saving strategies (even for ordinary condiments) but are also aware that their options are limited since for example, they do not engage in self-provisioning.

> *The crisis days of the month are the 12th and 13th… these days are the most critical!* (Pero, 32, father of 7 children)

> *I have to know how to save money, what is cheaper to buy… for example, I go to the shop for kitchen stuff like Vegeta,*[25] *salt, oil and I have to look at the prices. I can't afford those things that are expensive!* (Vesna 33, single mother of 2 children)

> *We don't have anything to live on, we don't have any land to plant anything… onions or potatoes, we have to go to the market.* (Elvis 49, father of 11 children)

In relation to dietary quality in terms of preferences (i.e. are they getting enough of what they want to eat?) findings show that Roma families living in food poverty have monotonous diets (e.g. only chicken, fried foods, beans, potatoes, etc.). In sum, these are meals that cost a little but can feed a lot. Frustrated that his family can only afford poultry, this father of 11 children expresses his desire to give his children other types of meat.

> *If I had 1500 HRK (196 EUR) now I would go to… Anywhere and buy a pig and kill it so that the children have something different to eat.* (Elvis, 49, father of 11 children)

25 A condiment mixture of salt with flavour enhancers, spices and various vegetables invented in 1959 by a Croatian scientist Zlata Bartl.

Adhering to monotonous diets is a household strategy that allows Roma families to survive with the "minimum required" by "eating what is cheaper". This corresponds to Bourdieu's (1986) description of the taste of necessity, which favours the most 'filling' and most economical foods compared to luxury items. Their diets also depend on the available appliance and fuel. Cooking over a wood stove is economical because it simultaneously provides heat, while others used tinned food to reduce cooking time. For example, referring to a Sunday lunch, a Roma mother recalls that she cooked beans using canned beans to save gas. Sweets are definitely a luxury item that is not frequently consumed in households that are living in food poverty.

> *They (her children) want more sweets every day… when I get my social benefits I can only give them sweets on that day and the next, maybe even the third day but the fourth, fifth…* (Vesna 33, single mother of 2 children)

Although poverty obviously reduces the possibility of choosing what we can eat it also determines where our food comes from. Food sources range from acceptable sources such as supermarkets and/or restaurants to less acceptable sources such as handouts and/or rubbish dumps. The search for cheaper supermarkets is usually complicated by transport problems. None of the Roma families that participated in the interviews mentioned ever going to a restaurant for meals. Instead they are dependent on 'scarce' social welfare food coupons or a soup kitchen (if available). They note with dissatisfaction that provisions are inadequate to meet the needs of their families and have even become worse in recent times.[26]

> *We used to get 3,500 HRK (458 EUR) but we don't get this any more. I get 1800 HRK (236 EUR) now. Now please listen, I really need more. I need more for food, for school, for firewood, for electricity… I need money for everything. People steal because they are hungry; we used to get help from the social services. We used to go to the shop and buy everything we need for the kitchen and now there's nothing. What can I buy for 400 HRK (52 EUR)?* (Dijana 49, mother of 11 children)

Eating food that has been thrown away is another option; this is food from rubbish dumps or waste containers.[27] None of participants in this study mentioned going to a 'social supermarket' to obtain food, which is a relatively new concept in Croatia. Evidently, these experiences also illustrate how food is never just food but that an inferior quality of food can translate into health and social inequalities.

Difficulties of feeding large families

Roma families living in food poverty show heightened concern for food as a daily preoccupation in interviews. Many are concerned about day-to-day survival – what they need to do today so that their children can eat; this is anxiety about the "here and now". This is suffering experienced day after day by many families that do not have the necessary minimum to meet their needs. It should also be noted that these families are further challenged in ways that undoubtedly complicate the task of feeding their families, especially if they are large. Namely, their homes often have poor infrastructure and investments in their improvements are financially unattainable and largely ignored by policy-makers. For example, in the entire sample (N=135 households) 24%

26 It needs to be noted here that more severe cuts (referred to earlier) were introduced following this fieldwork.

27 As tax-free food donations are still not possible in Croatia, many large supermarket chains throw out food that is still edible. A new Law on Agriculture related to this issue is expected to be passed by the end of 2015 in collaboration with Ministry of Finance. There are also plans for a food bank in Croatia that will cover four regions to meet the needs of areas with more inequalities.

do not have a safe water supply; 5% do not have electricity, not counting those with unsafe and unauthorized connections; and 16% do not have an indoor kitchen. Inevitably, the detrimental effects of poor infrastructure combined with poor nutrition inescapably translate into health inequalities for a large number of Roma families. Likewise, the stresses and deprivations of living on social benefits lead to further deterioration of family health. More specifically, kitchen spaces, if indoors, are often used for other purposes such as sleeping and bathing. There is also a marked lack of kitchen appliances or time-saving technologies (e.g. fridges, dishwashers, blenders, microwaves, ovens, etc.) in Roma households. Generally, kitchens are not well-stocked (a lack of essential ingredients) and there is a noticeable absence of furniture such as kitchen tables and chairs. On the whole, substandard housing complicates the routine acquisition, preparation, cooking and storage of food. In addition, the cumulative effect of these conditions has produced extreme conditions in the lives of many Roma families living in food poverty and has made the task of preparing and cooking food more arduous.

Roma households that experience severe material deprivation employ a number of survival strategies to feed their families. Some borrow money for food especially when hunger is acute just before social welfare monthly payments. Some depend on relatives for food, meals, and/or money. With their children, some women beg for food. Roma families living in poverty frequently engage in illicit activities or work in the shadow economy (e.g. collect scrap metal and other recyclables, acorns, firewood, mushrooms/porcini, sell goods at flea markets, food markets etc.). Although profitable, these activities are risky and not cost-effective[28] because of recently enforced restrictions, fines, and health hazards. All in all, Roma compete for the same limited resources in these income generating activities, which generally provide short term solutions that enable them to feed their families that day. Some families are dependent on a soup kitchen that was only available at one urban location. As the soup kitchen is not a homely environment and not conveniently close (40 minutes by bus in one direction), many families take these meals home each day. In some cases, families can stretch these meals across the day but sometimes they are not enough for dinner and/or breakfast the next day. Since this institution is based on 'the policy of acceptance of what they serve you without the possibility of choice,' Muslim families just take the bread on pork days.[29] Food donations are irregular, inadequate and not widespread. Food vouchers and one-time assistance from Centres of Social Welfare are not automatic entitlements and more restrictions have recently been introduced.[30] Structural violence is reproduced through humiliating interactions at social welfare offices where Roma families are often given the run-around. Under such circumstances, they are not always able to shield their children from a shortage of food. Plainly, their predicament is framed by structural forces such as overall recession, severe cutbacks in social welfare, poorly paid and unstable jobs, a precarious labour market, institutional racism and discrimination, especially in health and education.

28 Article 10 (8) and (9) of the Regulation of Waste Management (Official Gazette 23/14 and 51/14 in force since 21-2-2014) has recently introduced changes that directly affect people who collect recyclables. A limit of a 100 HRK (13 EUR) in cash a day has been introduced and larger transactions must be through an account. Access to earnings from this type of income generating activity is a problem because Roma accounts are often blocked due to debts.

29 Analysis of the soup kitchen's daily menu for the past two months shows that pork or meals that may be pork-based such as minced meat, sausages, meatballs, etc. are served between two and three times a week.

30 See footnote 5.

The ways that households living in poverty cope with food shortages are complex, logical, and varied depending on their resources and circumstances. They must be flexible to deal with day-to-day situations when they do not have enough money to get by. Roma spending patterns suggest that money is primarily spent on food and that costs related to school (food, books, excursions, extracurricular activities, etc.) clothing/shoes as well as public utility and maintenance only come in as a second priority. For many households, barriers to mobility affect Roma's ability to access healthy and affordable food and force them to depend on smaller, more expensive shops that have less choice in terms of quality. Other challenges further aggravate their chances of exiting the vicious circle of social exclusion. For example, Roma parents living in poverty could not afford to send their children to night school (to finish primary school). A mother who cannot afford to send her son who has just turned 15 to night school for two more grades explains:

> *You need to pay every month, where am I supposed to get this money from? 700 HRK (91 EUR) a month! From where? and transport as well. I can't send him to night school. There are nine of us… we have to survive! I have to cook three or four times a day. How can I afford 700 HRK a month* (Slađana 38, mother of 7 children)

Secondary school is a greater challenge. A father of four children sadly told us that his daughter was not able to go to secondary school at least two days a week because he could not afford the costs of transport and food each day. Sometimes she missed out several times a week, especially during the winter months because she was not able to walk in cold weather conditions to her school situated 5 km away. If she used public transport she had to stay hungry at school.

> *I used to tell her (daughter) not to eat at school because there is not enough money for the bus and food. She wanted to go school and we used to fight about this. I had to tell her that I didn't have enough money but she didn't understand this so I simply didn't let her go to school.* (Stanko 36, father of 4 children)

Gendered aspects

As food is intimately bound up with social relations, including those of power, of inclusion and exclusion (Caplan 1997:3) the gendered aspects of feeding Roma families are important to consider. Findings show that most of the Roma women in this study are mothers who breastfeed their children significantly longer than the majority population.[31] Even though their pregnancies are usually back-to-back, mothers sometimes simultaneously, breastfeed their children on average between 1 to 3 years as economic constraints function to support the maintenance of breastfeeding. Roma women, as a rule, are also solely responsible for all domestic chores including cooking and feeding other members of the household. Food preparation tasks in Roma households must be carried out regularly and frequently (this is usually several times a day in large families) and take up more time than any other type of domestic work. Socialisation into these gendered roles usually starts early at 9 or 10 for all girls. Mothers and other female relatives (grandmothers, sister-in laws) through their example teach girls these skills. Girls 'watch and learn' and subsequently do this work for their families.

31 According to the latest data in the Republic of Croatia, the percentage of exclusively breastfed infants dramatically decreases as infants get older. In other words, 71.8% of infants aged 0–2 months exclusively breastfeed while this figure decreases to 58.2% of infants between 3–5 months and to 19% of infants after 6 months (Croatian Institute of Public Health 2014: 110).

When I cook or when I make pastry she (referring to her 10 year old) has to be beside me to see what I'm doing because tomorrow she'll have her own husband… she has to learn. The day before yesterday we made pastry, home-made filo pastry. She made 5 or 6 sheets while I prepared the other food. (Senija, 33, 10 children)

Conversely, boys are brought up differently in that domestic duties related to food are not taught to, or expected from boys. In comparison, girls often have to end their schooling to meet the needs of their natal household (e.g. cooking, feeding, cleaning, infant and child care, care of sick and 'aged' members) particularly if the family is experiencing severe material deprivation. Subsequently, at a very young age, girls manage their own households[32] often with no help from their female kin. Research has shown the increased availability of time-saving technologies (such as microwaves) has led to a significant reduction in the time spent on domestic labour, especially for lower income women (see Heisig 2011). In contrast, other research (see Šikić-Mićanović 2005) has also shown that Roma fare poorly on measures of well-being with regard to household appliances as well as housing conditions, neighbourhood and community conditions, which make life to a large extent more difficult for Roma girls and women.[33] Although DeVault (1994: 232) contends that food preparation perpetuates relations of gender inequality in the household, under given circumstances she reminds us that it can provide 'a valued identity, a source of empowerment for women, and a means to perpetuate group survival.' The continuance of traditional styles of cooking from one generation to the next is mirrored in the continued transmission of knowledge (traditional recipes and techniques) so closely associated with being a proper woman and mother in Roma communities. In comparison, Roma men do not participate in household chores including the preparation and further work around meals that starkly contrasts with other current findings that show that men have increased their participation in household chores including the preparation of meals (see Gershuny, 2000). Nevertheless, they are responsible for what their families eat as they are more likely to be involved in the acquisition of food. Thus, this special relationship of women to food and nutrition in the domestic sphere can be seen either as empowering because it is a valued and socially acceptable identity among the Roma or as reinforcing women's subordinate role in the family. Notably, none of the women in this study had ever worked in the formal economy.

Although further ethnographic research on gendered power relations is indispensable to accurately evaluate the extent of gender inequalities, findings from this study pertinently show how gender intersects with ethnicity, age and class and how this transforms into gender inequalities for women. Namely, Roma women are often expected to prepare food, cook and feed families; although men are mostly responsible for obtaining food these tasks are not equally shared. For women living in poverty, these tasks are complex and laborious, especially if they have large families. Age is another aspect that needs to be considered as young Roma girls are often required to participate in household and care work from a young age especially in large families with economic hardships. If early marriage and multiple childbirth follow this essentially determines their life

32 It has been officially estimated that about 60% of Roma women enter cohabiting relationships at the age of 13 or 14 and they become mothers by the age of 15 (Ombudsperson for Gender Equality, 2005, 113).

33 Although gender and age play a central role in the ways food resources are distributed within a household (e.g. who eats what, who does not eat what, how much does each member eat, how many times a day, who decides this, etc.) shedding light on gender differences and power relations within families, this area of research was beyond the scope of this study.

paths since further educational and employment opportunities are limited. Finally, class is a salient element because all the tasks related to feeding become more complicated and stressful if access to adequate and different types of food as well as quality of food depends on income. Meals cannot be planned, organized or nutritionally balanced when financial problems are overriding. Roma families living in poverty frequently live in substandard housing with poor infrastructure. In addition, fewer household appliances and inadequate kitchen storage space complicate women's feeding work. Considering their low levels of education, Roma women living in poverty presumably have less knowledge on nutrition and home economics which in turn could make their work more difficult and a source of anxiety.

Concluding remarks

Research findings from this study clearly demonstrate that feeding is complex, laborious and highly gendered in some Roma families, especially those living in food poverty. Roma families that are severely materially deprived are more vulnerable to a poor diet and inadequate nutrition due to their substandard living conditions and constrained access to different types of capital. As a result, they are faced with constraints preventing them from affording and accessing healthy and nutritious diets on a regular basis. Their words apart from revealing grim biographical details allowed us to closely examine what is involved when someone is living in food poverty and how this translates into different types of inequalities. Lack of access to healthy and nutritious food aggravates health, social, educational, economic and gender inequalities that squarely places them at the bottom rung of the social ladder and promotes social suffering. Anxiety and stress about affording food, a poor or monotonous diet, high food prices and even hunger are a reality for many families on low incomes in this study and a constant feature of their lives. As hunger is the clearest sign of powerlessness because it means one lacks the control to satisfy one's most basic subsistence need (see Lappé and Collins 1986), urgent measures are needed to introduce inclusive policies that support rather than punish vulnerable people. Research has consistently shown that people living in poverty become criminalized objects of targeted policy and automatic suspects (Jeppesen 2009: 488). The structural violence of unemployment, insecure employment and inadequate social welfare operate invisibly and relentlessly punish vulnerable persons. Accordingly, they are wrongly accused of laziness and inferior intelligence because of their social welfare dependence and distrusted because of their engagement in illicit activities, which are in reality survival strategies. Clearly, these are processes and forces that conspire to constrain their agency and these power imbalances frustrate families and add to the hardship of poverty.

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